

ARTICLE APPEARED
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THE WASHINGTON TIMES
15 OCTOBER 1982

Democrats playing with U.S. intelligence

When retired Adm. Bobby Inman blew the whistle recently on the House Committee on Intelligence for playing partisan politics in its evaluation of American intelligence in Central America, his reputation as the quintessential professional lent weight to his warning that congressional oversight of the intelligence agencies "has to be bi-partisan."

The danger that the impartial congressional watchdogs appointed to insure the integrity of the intelligence process can be transformed by partisanship into quarreling pit terriers at each others' throats is dramatized by the incident that caused Inman to resign his consultancy with the House committee and to go public with his sharp criticism.

By a straight 9-5 party line vote, the Democratic majority in the House committee forced the public

release of a staff report on intelligence coverage in El Salvador and Nicaragua. In the words of Rep. Charles Rose D-N.C., the chairman of the subcommittee that prepared the study, this publicity was essential because of the danger that the CIA might otherwise be "coopted by the policy makers at the White House."

Claiming only to be interested in preserving the objectivity of the intelligence community against interference by the Reagan administration, the anonymous staffers who wrote the report note instances where the intelligence reporting has been guilty in their judgment of "tendentious rhetoric, occasional oversimplification and misstatement." This bitter pill is presumably made easier for the intelligence agencies to swallow by assurances that in general the intelligence has been good in spite of administration pressures.

Appearing just six weeks before a national election, this staff report

contains useful ammunition for liberal Democrats in districts where the Reagan administration's policy in Central America has become a major issue. There is the clear implication here that the administration has deliberately tried to slant the intelligence estimates in order to exaggerate the extent of Castro's intervention and has played down right wing terror.

Reacting sharply, the Republican minority on the House Intelligence Committee has fired back with "A Critique of the Staff Study" introduced into the *Congressional Record* by Rep. C.W. Bill Young R-Fla. In a point by point refutation, the critique purports to prove the majority report "to be extremely biased, containing overstatements, misstatements and subjective generalities."

This exchange of veiled insults

between the Democratic and Republican members and staff of the House committee shows how quickly the introduction of partisan politics into the oversight process can destroy its utility. With no access to the secret intelligence on which these conflicting views are based, the general public can only rely on the apolitical testimony of someone like Adm. Inman who has reviewed all the evidence. His conclusion is clear that the staff report released by the Democratic majority is "seriously flawed" and politically partisan.

On the chance that both the House and Senate Intelligence Committees can learn from this case to avoid partisan infighting in the future, it is worth reviewing the extent of real damage that has already been done.

First, Fidel Castro moved quickly to exploit a unique opportunity. Radio Havana's international service of

Oct. 4th carried a gloating description of how the House Intelligence Committee had found the CIA guilty of presenting "a false picture" of the real situation in El Salvador "in order to support Reagan's policy." For months to come, the staff report will provide invaluable grist for Castro's propaganda mills, while disheartening our democratic allies with the spectacle of an America at cross purposes with itself.

Another casualty of this episode is the relationship of mutual trust that existed between CIA analysts and the congressional committees. When Senate staffers recently attempted to set up a briefing on Central America, they found intelligence officials very reluctant to engage in frank discussion. These officials bitterly resented the fact that information they had given the House committee had been selectively misused. They felt they had been "sandbagged" by anonymous staffers and had no way of defending themselves because of the highly

classified nature of the evidence.

Finally, this politicization of congressional oversight has led senior Reagan officials to seriously question whether the U.S. government is any longer capable of responding to Soviet probes with covert action programs of any significance. Under present law, both intelligence committees have to be informed of any plan to provide secret support to friends and allies abroad. There is increasing doubt whether this clearance procedure can be relied on, if there seems to be any political advantage in leaking the plan in order to destroy it.

Since there is wide agreement that some form of congressional oversight is essential to keep the intelligence agencies honest, there is growing interest in replacing the two existing committees with a single joint committee with a highly professional staff like the old Joint Atomic Energy Committee. It may be the only way to save congressional oversight from self-destruction.

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